

## **What Makes Christian Development Christian?**

*Tim Chester, May 2002 - presented at Global Connections Relief and Development Forum*

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Consider the following scenarios:

1. A church member asks why they should give to a Christian development agency and not to a well-known secular agency. Why indeed? Do they get something different for their money? Or do they get the same thing done in a more Christian way – whatever that might mean?
2. An African denomination is able to get money for development from Western donors. The development department has modern offices, well-paid workers and four wheel drive vehicles. The village pastors have poor or intermittent salaries, if they have transport it is just a bike and they have few books. What does this reveal about the priorities of the world church?

We can restate the general scenario with a true story of an African denomination that I worked with on one occasion. The development department is able to access significant sums of grant money from Western donors – both Christian and non-Christian. They are doing great work which is integrated with the work of local churches. But the development workers are unhappy because in grant applications the development department overstates the salaries they receive and distributes the extra money to departments that cannot access money from the West. They stay because of their commitment to their church, but their salaries are a lot lower than they could receive from other NGOs. Yet they receive more than most people employed by the denomination. Most village pastors only get goods or work in kind.

3. A Christian NGO digs a well in an Indian village. The villagers have a strong sense of the spiritual world – they look to spirits for guidance, fertility and prosperity. The drilling team have strong technical skills. They do the right tests, drill in the right place and construct a good well. But what message is communicated? That salvation is found through Western technology and lifestyle? Or do the villagers thank their spirit-gods for the provision of this water? Or do they fail to use the water because they believe the cause of sickness is bad karma rather than dirty water?

### **Hermeneutical Foundations**

Before turning explicitly to what constitute the Christian distinctives of Christian community development, I want to establish some hermeneutical foundations.

#### *a. Authorial Intent*

As we approach a biblical perspective on the issues I want to make explicit a key evangelical hermeneutical assumption: namely that of authorial intent. Hermeneutics is the process of determining the authors' intent – both the human author and the divine author. We ask what the original author intended to communicate. Because God spoke through the human authors, when we discern the human author's intent we hear also the divine author's intent. The text itself is central, but it is central because it expresses the author's intent. The reader's perspective is also important, but only in order to prevent us misreading the author's intent. The principles of authorial intent are central to an evangelical approach to the Scriptures for it locates meaning of the text in divine revelation.

#### *Liberal hermeneutics*

Liberalism sees the kingdom as the activity of God in history and the role of the church is to discern God's activity in the world. The reality, however, is that such discernment is largely shaped by Enlightenment values. The world has become the interpretative grid through which we understand theology and so the Bible becomes a mirror in which the Enlightenment values of human rights; reason and education; progress and civilisation; democracy; tolerance; and pluralism are uncritically reflected back. One might caricature it as a move from author-centred hermeneutics to Enlightenment-centred hermeneutics.

### *Liberation hermeneutics*

Liberation theology is a reaction to liberalism which it regards as bourgeois. One of the strengths of the hermeneutics of liberation theology is the emphasis on the integration of practice (praxis) and theology. A commitment to the liberation of the poor was seen as a precondition for theology. The reality is that just as liberalism read back from the Bible its Enlightenment presuppositions, so liberationism reads back from the Bible its Marxist presuppositions. But liberation theology makes of virtue of this. Liberation theology does not claim to be a universal theology. It is highly contextualised. It is theology for the poor. The objective reading of an author-centred hermeneutics has been replaced by contextualised reading of a poor-centred hermeneutics. It is important that we take into account our perspectives as readers of the Scripture. We come with our prejudices and presuppositions. If we are not aware of these they will colour our interpretation of the Bible. Liberation theology has alerted us to the wealth of material on poverty and justice that had gone un-noticed in Western theology. But critical self-awareness is very different from reader-centred hermeneutics or, in this case, poor-centred hermeneutics.

### *Postmodern hermeneutics*

This is more subtle. Development is popular among a new generation of Christians. Our society will not pillory you for caring for the poor in the way that it does if you 'arrogantly' proclaim revealed truth or if you 'proselytise'. We see the impact of this on Christian development in the desire to conflate development and evangelism into one activity in which we harness the potential of a community to bring about economic, social and spiritual change. We do not start with gospel proclamation, but with the felt needs of a community and the potential of that community. Bryant Myers, for example, says:

The 'study, preach, and teach' frameworks of the expository preacher or the theological teacher are 'outsider' methodologies in which experts provide the knowledge that the non-experts do not have ... this contradicts the principles of local ownership, local direction, and the idea that the responsibility for development, including spiritual development, belongs to the people and not to us.<sup>1</sup>

We must, however, resist the postmodern assumption that the Bible is open to a variable range of (local) interpretations. Often the Bible interprets itself, giving one understanding and ruling out others. Myers suggests some techniques that allow for open inquiry. What is common to them is an absence of any concern for authorial intent. But with the relegation of authorial intent comes the relegation of objectivity and absolute truth. Authorial intent refers to the meaning intended by the divine author as it is mediated through the intent of the human author. Without a concern for authorial intent, the Bible simply provides us with an echo of 'our truth'. As we have said already, it is important to recognise our prejudices and presuppositions as we read the Bible. But critical self-awareness is very different from reader-centred hermeneutics.

### *Evangelical hermeneutics*

Evangelicals in development too often resort to a proof-texting approach to hermeneutics. In every policy document in which I was involved in Tearfund I resisted the pressure to include biblical references for this very reasons. The result is usually poor hermeneutics. It encourages people to think that by referring to a few isolated texts, often taken out of context, they are therefore thinking biblically about an issue.

Consider the following examples from *Guide My Steps*,<sup>2</sup> a compendium of Bible studies from the Tearfund development journal, *Footsteps*. A study on the story of Joseph sees Joseph as a model because he had 'the skills of good management'. He needed authority and likewise 'anyone put in charge of a disaster management programme also needs authority to make and carry out quick decisions that others will respect and obey'. Joseph's plan seemed good to Pharaoh and likewise people need to trust the leader in disaster situations today. Joseph encouraged new patterns of land use and set up regional distribution centres.

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<sup>1</sup> Bryant Myers, *Walking with the Poor* (Orbis, 1999), 226-7.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Bishop (ed.), *Guide My Steps* (Tearfund, 1997).

But is this what the Joseph narrative is really in the Bible to teach us? Would you teach this if you were coming to text without a predetermination to draw lessons for disaster management? We are told that just as Egypt provided food for other countries, so 'good disaster planning can have far-reaching benefits'. What the study does not remind us is the way Joseph used Pharaoh's monopoly on grain during the famine to extort all the people's money from them, then their livestock and finally their land and themselves until we read:

*Joseph bought all the land in Egypt for Pharaoh. The Egyptians, one and all, sold their fields, because the famine was too severe for them. The land became Pharaoh's, and Joseph reduced the people to servitude, from one end of Egypt to the other. (Genesis 47:20-21)*

If Joseph is a model of disaster-preparedness is he also a model of how to use a monopoly in a time of famine? The Bible study with the question, 'How much can be learnt from Joseph's management skills that could help us in our own day-to-day management of our work?'

When we choose to learn, for example, to prepare for disaster, but chose not to learn to use monopolies to exploit others our choices are determined by factors outside the text of Genesis. We are imposing our presuppositions on the text and then mistakenly thinking that the text teaches them. We are not hearing the voice of God, but an echo of our own voice. What happens when we read a biblical story, for example, as a moral or developmental example is that we make judgments about the actions of its characters. We then 'hear' the text confirming these moral or developmental judgments. But in reality they have been our judgments throughout. We think disaster preparedness is a good idea (which I am sure it is), we then find a story that seems to talk about preparing for a disaster and think we have biblical confirmation of our ideas.

But simply because the Bible describes certain actions does not mean it prescribes them. It would not be hard to think of biblical stories that describe events that from the wider perspective of the Bible we would consider morally dubious. Are we to take the story of Joseph as justification to use monopolies to oppress people? The biblical narrative is more concerned with the unfolding purposes of God in accordance with his word of promise to Abraham and Israel, and how people respond to that word.

*b. The ladder of abstraction*

We do not have to justify every action with the Bible, but we do have to ensure that all our actions are part of an approach to development that is shaped by a broad biblical framework. Consider what is sometimes called 'the ladder of abstraction'. It shows how our practice can be linked to our worldview – in this case a biblical worldview. Our worldview shapes our values, our values shape the principles and goals we adopt, these determine our policies and decisions which are then implemented through our practice. It is called the ladder of abstraction because it shows how abstract ideas are linked to practical action.

For example:

Worldview	God made mankind to steward his creation and know his blessing.
Values	People should have the opportunity to provide for their families, contribute to their communities and learn of God's blessing.
Principles and Goals	We will create employment opportunities for people, encouraging them to contribute to their communities and respond to the gospel.
Policies and Decisions	We will establish credit schemes, provide business advice and look for opportunities to talk about Jesus.
Practice	We will recruit and train volunteers from local churches to run credit schemes in poor communities.

This model shows how our worldview is linked to our practice. Another organisation may run a similar credit scheme. And so one running a credit scheme is not a distinctly Christian action. But we can show how that credit scheme is informed by a biblical worldview. This gets us away from proof-texting. Decisions are based on biblically-informed principles. We do not have to find biblical references for every detail of our practice. Not every decision requires biblical reflection when our lives and our work are rooted in a broader biblical framework.

Notice, too, that as we go down the ladder Christian distinctiveness decreases. At the bottom of the ladder, we can borrow freely from the wisdom of the world. And so this model helps us decide whether we need specifically Christian input or not. In this case, we do not need to go to Christians to find out how to run a good credit scheme. And yet our actions are still biblically informed.

## *2. A biblical worldview shaped by the story of redemption*

Instead of thinking in terms of proof-texting, we need to start thinking in terms of the Bible's big story – a biblical worldview. Our development practice should be set in the framework of a biblical worldview shaped by the story of redemption. We should explore issues by looking at them in the light of: creation; fall; redemption – promised in the Old Testament and accomplished through Christ; and the consummation, that is the return of Christ and the transformation of all things.

What we need is to develop an approach to development informed by a biblical worldview. If we can get this firmly in place, we can allow it to shape our policies and practice. Being biblical then means ensuring that our policies and practices are related to our biblical framework rather appending isolated biblical texts to each action.

The Tearfund operating principles were intended as a framework for Christian development which was self-consciously shaped by a biblical worldview and the biblical story. The document begins:

The causes of poverty and marginalisation are complex, but we believe they stem from broken relationships. The goal of Christian development is restored relationships with the Creator, with others in community and with the environment. The world God made was good, but human rebellion has led to exclusion, mistrust, greed and injustice. Jesus Christ came in the fulfilment of the promise of God to restore good relationships between God, his people and creation. Through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, people are saved from God's condemnation. They become part of God's new community and experience the peace and justice of his coming rule. God has a special concern for the poor and powerless. Because God's intention is reconciliation and community he has a special concern for those who are marginalised and excluded.

The peace and justice of God's kingdom are recognisable now through the power of the Holy Spirit, but will only be fully realised when Christ returns in glory. In the power of the Holy Spirit we are called to play our part in bringing reconciliation to our disordered world. Tearfund's focus is on the economically poor and powerless, but our concern is to see restored relationships in all their fullness, not just economic well-being.

Christian development is distinctive because of our commitment to reconciling people to God. However, in the Bible, reconciliation with God cannot be separated from reconciliation with others. Our responsibility to God is expressed through our response to others. This is the wellspring of Christian development.

## **The Nomenclature of Christian development**

We are not even sure what to call the topic we are considering. What are we to call Christian involvement with the poor? People have searched for a term that describes a distinctively Christian approach to the issue.

### *Development*

This is the traditional term for work to reduce poverty, whether at a macro or micro level. The word 'development' implies a process of positive change. The problem is that it suggests a linear process with undeveloped countries or communities at one end of the line and development countries and communities at the other end. Because of the dominance of economics in many people's thinking, 'development' runs the risk of implying that wealthy

countries are more developed and therefore superior to poorer countries. It suggests that the underdeveloped have failed where the developed have succeeded without a recognition of the inter-connectedness between the wealth of the developed and the poverty of the underdeveloped. Furthermore, it does not help us define Christian distinctives in development. Indeed, most people more readily associate the term with material improvement without necessarily implying any spiritual transformation.

#### *Holistic ministry*

This latter concern, to define Christian distinctives, has led to the phrase 'holistic ministry' or 'holistic development'. The term affirms a concern for the whole person – physical, social, emotional and spiritual – and an approach to ministry that addresses all these various dimensions. The problem is that 'holistic' is now commonly used elsewhere to mean different things – including by secular development agencies. It no longer works as a definition of the distinctive nature of a Christian approach.

#### *Transformation*

'Transformation' or 'transformational development' have become common phrases. It was the phrase advocated by a significant consultation at Wheaton in 1983 which entitled its findings 'Transformation: The Church in Response to Human Need'. In his contribution to the consultation, entitled 'From Development to Transformation', Wayne Bragg said:

I propose an alternative framework for understanding human and social change from a Christian perspective, which I will call *transformation* ... Transformation is a part of God's continuing action in history to restore all creation to himself and to its rightful purposes and relationships ... Transformation is a joint enterprise between God and humanity in history, not just a mechanistic or naturalistic process. It involves a transformation of the human condition, human relationships, and whole societies. The so-called 'developed' modernized world needs transformation to free itself from a secular, materialistic condition marked by broken relationships, violence, economic subjugation, and devastation of nature; and the 'underdeveloped' world needs transformation from the subhuman condition of poverty, premature death, hunger, exposure, oppression, disease, and fear. Whereas 'development' tends to be a term that the West applies to the Third World, transformation is equally applicable to both the 'overdeveloped' and the 'underdeveloped' worlds.<sup>3</sup>

The word arises out of a critique of the term 'development' and the notions that lie behind it and is used to encompass both spiritual and social change and to encompass work in both northern and southern contexts.

The problem is that 'transformation' is an ambiguous term. Like 'development', it actually only means 'change'. Transformation can be negative as well as positive. While it might break free from the historical legacy associated with the term 'development', it does not give any content to change that might be conducted in its name. It can mean anything and therefore it means nothing. Reviewing a book entitled *Mission as Transformation*, Haddon Willmer says:

Transformation has been chosen as a brand-name, and even as a key criterion of what mission is about. Is it a clear concept? It is used in several different meanings which do not cohere, although it may be optimistically assumed they do.<sup>4</sup>

This matters because such an ambiguous term does not give a robust framework to prevent a drift from a gospel focus. The term 'transformation' allows its users to conflate evangelism and social involvement into one single activity. Indeed for some this is its great merit. But

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<sup>3</sup> Wayne G. Bragg, 'From Development to Transformation,' *The Church in Response to Human Need*, eds. Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (Regnum, 1987), 38-40.

<sup>4</sup> Haddon Willmer, review of *Mission as Transformation: a Theology of the Whole Gospel*, eds. Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden (Oxford: Regnum, 1999) in *Transformation* 18:3 (July 2001), 195.

when this done either one element or the other – but usually evangelism – is easily lost and the resultant distortion can then be justified in the name of transformation.<sup>5</sup>

### *Integral mission*

The terms 'integral mission' or 'integral evangelism' come from the Spanish term 'misión integral'. This term has long been used in Latin America and was recently adopted by the Micah Network – a worldwide network of evangelical churches and agencies involved in ministry among the poor. The Micah Declaration defines integral mission as follows:

Integral mission ... is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life and our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup>

The wording of this definition was chosen with care. It retains the idea that proclamation and social involvement are distinct activities because when they are fused into one entity one or other soon falls away. But while proclamation and social involvement are distinct, they cannot operate apart from one another. According to the Oxford English Dictionary 'integrated' means 'made up of parts', but 'integral' means 'of, or necessary to the completeness of, a whole'. Integral mission recognises that proclamation and social involvement are *necessary* components of the mission or task of the church.

This discussion of terms might appear to be an exercise in pedantry. We cannot expect single words or couplets to carry so much weight. But the debate does provide a good introduction to the issues of defining a Christian approach to development.

### **Towards a Christian Distinctive**

What is distinctive about Christian development? The question has been answered in a number of ways. Some reply that a Christian doing development from a Christian motivation is sufficient. The work they do may be identical to that of any other person. It is enough that they do it as a Christian. How would we answer the question if asked of a Christian carpenter? Surely the product of a Christian carpenter is no different from that of another carpenter. In the same way, so the argument goes, development is development regardless of who does it. The only difference for the Christian is that their motivation is God-centred.

Yet even in the case of a carpenter, while the product may be similar, there is a case for saying that the manner in which it is delivered should be distinctive. The way in which one treats your customer, employees and employers may be different. Your Christian faith will have a bearing on your integrity, service and goals. In the same way, Christians will approach development in a way that reflects certain Christian truths and values. There are characteristics of a Christian approach to development that stem from a biblical worldview.

In 1998-1999 I was involved in a project with Tearfund, the UK-based evangelical development agency, to develop what were called 'operating principles'. The document was intended as a statement of what Tearfund considered to be good Christian development – both from a developmental and theological point. The principles consciously brought together the theological and developmental thinking within the organisation. The process began with the 'development practitioners' stating what they would want in a statement of good development with this critiqued by the theologians. The theologians then did the same. This led to a discussion paper and various draft statements which were circulated and recirculated to staff, partners (indigenous churches and Christian organisations working among the poor in over 90 countries around the world), external experts, Board members and international sisters organisations.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Published in Tim Chester (ed.), *Justice, Mercy and Humility: Integral Mission and the Poor*, (Paternoster, 2002).

In the Tearfund operating principles we identified the following characteristics of good Christian development:

- compassion
- justice
- character
- cultural sensitivity
- cultural transformation
- accountability
- leadership
- empowerment for service
- participation
- sustainability
- integration

It would be tempting to expound the theological underpinning and practical implications of all of these. I want to affirm that good development involves a community development and social transformation approach rather than a welfare or functional development approach (although we should value the latter as entry points into the community). I do not want you to think that my neglect of these principles suggests they are not important. But I want to focus on the specific question: What makes Christian development distinctly Christian?

Does doing development with these values make development distinctly Christian? The answer is Yes and No.

Yes, activities which implement Christian values consistently are Christian. Stating it the opposite way round we might say that development which fails to reflect one or more of these values is sub-Christian. They define Christian development in the sense that they define what is not-not-Christian development. But such a double negative is clearly some way short of a positive definition of Christian development.

Such values do not define what is *distinctive* about Christian development. Many non-Christians involved in development share similar values. They may not articulate a biblical basis for them, but they do share them and often practice them more consistently than Christians. We cannot claim that such values or approaches are unique. If we look at the list of characteristics, most of them could be affirmed by non-Christian agencies and practitioners.

We should not bemoan this. When unbelievers adopt behaviours and attitudes that are consistent for biblical values we should rejoice in God's common grace in their lives and their cultures. But we must look elsewhere to define what is distinctly Christian about Christian development.

So *Christian values are necessary, but not sufficient, for development to be Christian*. When we compare the best of Christian development and the best of secular development there will be much that is similar, but development that is truly Christian will be profoundly different from any secular development.

### **Christian Distinctives in Development**

With this biblical framework in place, I want to highlight four distinctives of Christian development and then to suggest that they can be reduced to one focal element.

#### **1. Reconciliation**

Traditionally many evangelicals have had a somewhat individualistic view of the Christian faith. By making a personal relationship with God its touchstone, evangelical theology has struggled to give the community of God's people the importance it receives in the biblical

narrative which is structured around God's promise to have a people who are his people. Salvation is corporate.

What are the implications of this for development?

Evangelical social ethics usually focuses on justice as the key theme. The Croatian theologian, Miroslav Volf, writing against the context of the ethnic conflict in his homeland, argues that *reconciliation* should be the overarching theme. This was the argument he development in the 1997 Henry Martyn Lecture sponsored by Global Connections.<sup>7</sup> Justice is important, says Volf, but we must not make it an end in itself. Our goal is reconciliation. This mirrors our salvation. The sacrifice of Christ on the cross satisfies the justice of God, but this is not an end in itself – it is the means by which we are reconciled to God.

This makes sense in the context of development because poverty is fundamentally a relational reality. Poverty is about the break down of relationships and the abuse of relationships. Poverty is about *powerlessness* in which relationships do not operate as they should and *marginalisation* when people are unable to participate in community relationships. (Three of the five elements in Robert Chambers' seminal deprivation trap are relational: isolation, powerlessness and vulnerability.<sup>8</sup>) It occurs when people are excluded from resources, opportunities and power, and when their voice is not heard. The point I want to highlight is that poverty is understood in terms of marginalisation and vulnerability. The following is a quote from a participant in a 'poverty hearing':

*In part it is about having no money, but there is more to poverty than that. It is about being isolated, unsupported, uneducated and unwanted. Poor people want to be included and not just judged and 'rescued' at times of crisis.*  
(Mrs Jones, a mother who has lived in poverty all her life)<sup>9</sup>

Development, understood in terms of reconciliation or the restoration of relationships, is about ensuring the voice of the poor is heard. It is about their inclusion in society and enabling them to contribute to their communities. Nor can development truly occur without a change among the rich and powerful. They, too, need to be liberated from their selfishness and brought back into a proper relationship with those who are poor.

The biblical word 'shalom' best describes the *goal* of Christian development, Shalom represents restored relationships with the Creator, with others in community and with the environment. The advantage of this approach is that it does not separate reconciliation with God through the gospel from the integration of the poor into the wider community. Nor does it ignore the importance of concern for the environment.

A focus on relationships is simply a way of making this focus on reconciliation concrete. The Tearfund operating principles include the question: How does what we are doing affect relationships? The fundamental nature of this perspective should not be overlooked. It shifts the focus of development away from products – wells, immunisation, homes, loan schemes and so on – to people.

But we must not lose sight of the fact that true reconciliation is found in Christ. The doctrine of creation reminds us that we are made relational beings and development is successful when the poor are included in communities. The doctrine of sin reminds us that poverty is a root of the breakdown of relationships that occurs because of human sinfulness and selfishness and so development is the business of restoring relationships. This is good as far as it goes. This gives us a framework for understanding and evaluating development. But the doctrine of salvation reminds us that ultimately reconciliation is found only in Christ through the gospel. Any development that does not include this is incomplete.

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<sup>7</sup> Miroslav Volf, 'The Social Meaning of Reconciliation,' Henry Martyn Lecture 1997 (London: Global Connections)

<sup>8</sup> Robert Chambers, *Rural Development: Putting the Last First* (IT, 1983).

<sup>9</sup> Paul Vallely, 'Mrs Jones has Something to Say,' *The Independent*, 7 August 1996.

Development activity – what we do – is incomplete if it does not include the proclamation of the gospel by which people are reconciled with God and one another in Christ. And, while we will rejoice at every sign that the poor are included in community, development outcomes – what we hope to achieve by what we do – will be incomplete unless people are reconciled with God through the gospel. The Tearfund operating principles say: ‘the greatest need of the poor, as with all people. We are therefore committed to the proclamation of the gospel.’

## 2. Eschatology

A second distinctive of Christian development arises from a Christian view of the future and especially the recognition that the eternal future has priority over time.<sup>10</sup>

The whole biblical narrative is moving towards a future consummation, under-girded by the belief that the future that God promises is better than the present we currently experience. Paul says, ‘I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us’ (Romans 8:17). He goes on to argue that we, like creation, groan as we wait for the future glory for our redemption in the future. We do not yet have that for which we hope (Romans 8:22-25; see also 1 Corinthians 15:12-18).

This is reinforced by numerous specific texts. Consider Matthew 18:8-9. ‘If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life maimed or crippled than to have two hands or two feet and be thrown into eternal fire ...’ (Matthew 18:8-9). It is better to be maimed in this life and enter heaven than to be healthy in this life and spend eternity in hell. In the same way, we need to say without shame that it is better if someone is converted but remains poor, than if they are empowered, strengthened in community and improve their economic status, but remain unconverted.

Of course, we do not have to make this choice in the practice of mission. A concern for someone’s temporal needs will be inter-twined with a concern for their eternal needs since both flow from Christian love. But without an awareness of their eternal needs the focus will become over time their temporal needs. A community’s temporal needs press themselves upon us. They are, by definition, immediate. We need consciously therefore to keep in mind that greatest need which is known to us only through the gospel – the need of a person to be reconciled with God and escape his wrath.

This means reconciliation with God through the gospel must be a priority for any Christian work among the poor. Of course, each context will determine the specific approach. This is not an argument for bad evangelism. We should proclaim the gospel in the context of concern for the whole person. Nevertheless, proclaim the gospel we must. The Tearfund operating principles say:

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<sup>10</sup> In his book *Bridging the Gap: Evangelism, Development and Shalom* (MARC, 1993), Bruce Bradshaw uses *shalom* as an integrating framework within which to view development. But throughout the otherwise excellent book, he assumes without any discussion that all positive change in history should be viewed as part of God’s redemptive activity – an activity furthermore in which he says we co-operate. Such an approach is all too common, but from a biblical perspective it is over-realised eschatology. In the New Testament the kingdom of God is always associated with the conscious confession of Christ. The kingdom is extended through the proclamation of his name and exhibited in the obedience of his disciples. Social change which takes place apart from the confession of Christ may be part of the providential rule of God and an expression of what the reformed tradition calls ‘common grace’, but it is a mistake to see it as the kingdom of God. Yes, God reigns over all people. The Old Testament affirms that God is King. But something new has happened with the coming of Jesus. God is re-establishing his reign in a new way through his messiah – his anointed king. This saving rule, which we experience through the gospel, is an anticipation of the coming new creation. Furthermore, Christian hope is always certain hope. But social change is always fragmentary and fragile. The changes that we bring in a community may be lost. I remember the poignant sense of loss of a friend who had spent four years working in Rwanda when in 1994 genocide ripped through that country and undid all his work. This is reality in a world that is yet to be liberated from the bondage to decay. And so we patiently wait for the return of Christ.

Therefore [given the priority of the future] reconciliation with God through submission to Jesus Christ is the greatest need of the poor, as with all people. We are therefore committed to the proclamation of the gospel.

Sometimes such a focus on the future is dismissed as dualism. But that is a mistake. Dualism has become something of a bogey word that can be used to dismiss arguments without a true engagement with the issues. Properly speaking dualism is the belief that the spiritual is good while the material is bad; that salvation is for the soul to escape the prison of the body. Christian theology, in contrast, affirms that creation was made good and that salvation involves the resurrection of the body. We are right to oppose such dualism. But dualism is *not* the belief that the present has equal value to the future.

The priority of the future also represents a considerable challenge to rich Christians to prioritise the kingdom of God over present comforts and so be free to serve God and seek the good of the poor. Without eschatology we are left with a limp Christian existentialism in which immediate experience is everything. This future orientation in Christian discipleship has considerable implications for us in a world of rich and poor. It challenges our priorities at a deep level. Jesus said:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

### 3. Prayer

A third distinctive of Christian development is a commitment to prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. The work we do must be set in the context of prayer. It is not just the act of praying which is significant. It is the recognition that prayer expresses of our total dependence upon God. We too easily put our confidence in technological solutions or the best practice of participatory development. Or we claim that advocacy is the only way to bring about fundamental change. But in reality significant change only takes place through the gracious power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

One of the dangers of Christian development professional is that we ignore the importance of prayer. This spiritual dimension is often missing from Western approaches to poverty and development, both at theoretical and practical levels. This can be as true for Christian development practitioners as it is for secular practitioners because we are heavily influenced by our modernistic training and culture. Yet among many Third World communities the spiritual world continues to be a key element defining their reality. Myers describes an exercise with a tribal group in India. The group identified eight areas in which they would like see social change. They were then asked to rank three possible sources of power over these areas: (1) the tribal group themselves, (2) outsiders (government, neighbours, NGOs), and (3) gods and spirits. In the minds of the villagers in seven of eight areas the gods and spirits exercised significant control.

Prayer is important, too, because rich and poor alike have equal access to prayer. The poor who are excluded from so many of the world's resources, have access to this great heavenly resource. CB Samuel says:

Prayer is the ordinary person's instrument. In their transformation the poor have one instrument which no force on earth can deny them: the instrument of prayer. They naturally qualify because 'a broken and a contrite heart God will not despise' (Psalm 51:17).<sup>11</sup>

But we should view prayer as a tool of development, nor as a mechanism to produce blessings from God or results in our work. It is instead a recognition of dependence on God.

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<sup>11</sup> Tim Hamilton, *Your Kingdom Come: Praying for the Poor* (Tearfund, 1994), 4.

In one sense, prayer does not change things. It is God who changes things. It is a recognition of our utter dependence on God that rightly drives us to prayer.

Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labour in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. (Psalm 127:1)

If we truly believe this then we will be driven to prayer. CB Samuel puts it well when he says 'Prayer is not an art. It is a cry. You cannot pretend it or practice it. You can only express it'.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. The Church

The fourth distinctive is the commitment to working with the church – what is sometimes called the largest grassroots movement in the world.

One of the greatest challenges we Christians have at the threshold of the third millennium is the articulation and practical implementation of an ecclesiology that views the local church, and particularly the church of the poor, as the primary agent of holistic mission. Such a thesis may not be readily accepted by people who have made of 'development' among the poor a life career. It is essential, however, to the task of facilitating, in response to God's call, the practice of holistic mission among the greatest possible number of local churches – and let us remember that the large majority of local churches around the world are poor, indeed, very poor – that they may be 'the salt of the earth' and 'the light of the world'.<sup>13</sup>

Rene Padilla challenges development agencies to make the church the 'primary agent' of 'holistic mission'. Local churches are the normative agencies in the Bible for mission and care, and the natural place in which integral mission can remain integral. Furthermore, *sustainable Christian development requires sustainable Christian communities*. In other words, projects may lead to sustainable development without a local church, but they cannot sustain development that is *distinctly* Christian without a local community of believers.

A person's reaction to an emphasis on the local church in mission and development depends a good deal on their perspective and even personal history. To those who start with biblical theory a commitment to the local church is natural and welcome. Likewise, those involved in grassroots Christian development remind us that the church is the largest grassroots organisation in the world – one whose presence often outlasts the changing strategies of NGOs. Those, however, whose experience of church has been one of conflict, pain, bureaucracy or conservatism, are likely to react negatively to an emphasis on the local church. Likewise development professionals may be sceptical about the 'amateurism' of local congregations.

The Bible, however, places the church at the heart of the purposes of God. At the heart of God's plan of salvation are a family and a nation. The church is not simply an historic convenience – a useful way of organising discipleship and mission. The bride of Christ is at the heart of the climax of salvation in the new creation. God's purposes are not only to redeem a people for himself, but also to reconcile them with one another. Furthermore, the life of the Christian community is part of the gospel *message* of reconciliation. And the life of the Christian community is part of the *medium* by which that message is communicated. Lesslie Newbigin speaks of the congregation as 'the hermeneutic of the gospel' – the church interprets the gospel for the wider world (*The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*, pp. 222-233). The unity of the church witnesses to the saving purposes of God (John 17:23). Mission takes place as people see our love for one another (John 13:34-35). So there cannot be mission apart from concrete expressions of Christian community. The New Testament does not speak of development project or evangelistic initiatives. It speaks rather of local congregations as inclusive, caring and proclaiming communities.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Tim Chester, 'Christ's Little Flock: Towards an Ecclesiology of the Cross.' *Evangel* 19:1 (Spring 2001), 13.

But it is not only biblical perspectives that point to the primacy of the local church in mission and development. The experience of development suggests that the church is the best way to ensure that all the dimensions of Christian development are integrated. Reflecting on his experience of the ups and downs of the facilitating UK local churches in community development, Tulo Raistrick says:

To my mind working with the local church is the most obvious way of making development holistic. At the end of the day what we are committed to is holistic transformation which involves the spiritual: if we ignore the church - what are we doing? To my mind the local church is absolutely key ... If you can enable, stimulate and challenge the churches who are working with the poor in their communities, if you can achieve that, then they are the best places for development to take place.<sup>14</sup>

The church lasts in a way that agencies do not. The church has often had a presence in a local community for years. That means both that they are well placed to work with the poor, but also that their work is likely to be sustainable in the long-term. As Gladys Wathanga, a Tearfund worker says, says:

I know that when I go back to Kenya my church will still be there, but I don't know whether my development organisation will be. They are in today and could be out tomorrow, but the local church is there for years.<sup>15</sup>

The local church is not just close to the grassroots, it is the grassroots. As the opening quote of this paper from Rene Padilla reminds us, the local church is not just working with the poor, it is the poor. Tulo Raistrick again:

One of my concerns, although I couldn't give you any evidence, is that it is very easy for us as a development agency to work in this development sphere with other people in other countries who speak the same language, but actually very little ends up filtering down to grassroots. The advantage of working with the local church, is often the local church are the poor themselves. And if they are not poor themselves, they've often had direct contact with the poor, just through their lives.<sup>16</sup>

### **Conclusion: the Gospel and Development**

Let me conclude by bringing these four elements together and saying that in short what makes Christian development distinctly Christian is a commitment to the conversion of the poor through the gospel. The Tearfund operating principles say: 'Christian development is distinctive because of our commitment to reconciling people to God'.

The form our gospel proclamation takes will vary depending on the context. In situations of extreme persecution it may be no more than an on-going Christian presence. Often in such debates, people highlight the worst cases of evangelism as if a commitment to gospel reconciliation forced you to justify such activities. A commitment to gospel proclamation does not mean a commitment to bad, uncontextualised, manipulative or crass gospel proclamation. But in Christian development there will always be a commitment to the reconciliation of the poor with God through the gospel. The proclamation of the gospel must be at the heart of Christian development. Our aim will always be that poor are blessed in this life *and* for all eternity.

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<sup>14</sup> Tulo Raistrick and Tim Chester, 'The Church and its Role in Development' (unpublished paper, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Cited in Tulo Raistrick and Tim Chester, 'The Church and its Role in Development' (unpublished paper, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> Tulo Raistrick and Tim Chester, 'The Church and its Role in Development' (unpublished paper, 1999).

We need to be explicit about this because it is common for development and proclamation to be conflated into one activity. This usually ends up with one activity – usually evangelism – being lost. Attempts to fuse development and proclamation cannot work from a biblical perspective for two reasons:

First, as we noted when we look at eschatology, development is about effecting change in history. It is historical provisional. It can be un-done. Proclamation is about effecting eschatological change.

Second, development at its best is about harnessing the resources within a community. It is about empowering a community through participation. Both an understanding of the problem and its solutions come from within a community. In contrast, the message of the gospel is that we are powerless and cannot participate in our salvation. Both an understanding of the problem and a solution must come from outside the community. This outside message does not come from Western technology, money, expertise, still less from free market capitalism. It comes from God.

It is a basic rule of hermeneutics that texts make sense only in their context. The same is true of mission. Our text – the message we proclaim – will be interpreted by the context of our lives and our life together as Christian communities. Proclamation cannot take place apart from a context. The question is whether that context is congruent with the message of transforming grace in Jesus Christ. The context that properly interprets the gospel message is love and a loving community. In our love for the 'other' – especially the marginalised – we model the grace of God just as Jesus did in his table fellowship with the outcasts of his day.

We need development which is the context for witness and proclamation. When working among the poor, to give our message the context that fits its content we must express love through a commitment to their development. In 2001 over 140 theologians and development practitioners gathered in Oxford under the auspices of the Micah Network. The resultant Micah Declaration says:

In integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life and our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ.

### **Postscript: Christ's 'little flock'**

I was telling one of my colleagues that my vision for Christian mission and development was neither sophisticated evangelistic programmes nor professional development projects, but for 'Christ's little flock' – small inclusive, caring communities of believers. He embodied that for me as he told me of a church he had visited in the slums of Bombay called 'The Valley of Praise'. The church meets over the one-room home of its leaders. There is an AIDS clinic in a room across the passage. In his notes he had written:

This is an amazing place tucked among the slum passages. It has an upper room which can fit a congregation of 50-60 at a squeeze. This room doubles up for pre-school classes, over night accommodation for street children, clinic and a small library of literature.

This, it seems to me, corresponds to the New Testament vision of both mission and development. This is the vehicle for Christian hope in our world. The kingdom of God has not been given to those who wield political influence or who run national evangelistic campaigns or who receive media attention. The kingdom of God has been given to Christ's 'little flock' (Luke 12:32).

### **Appendix: Tearfund Operating Principles (May 1999)**

#### **Christian development**

The causes of poverty and marginalisation are complex, but we believe they stem from broken relationships. The goal of Christian development is restored relationships with the

Creator, with others in community and with the environment.<sup>17</sup> The world God made was good, but human rebellion has led to exclusion, mistrust, greed and injustice. Jesus Christ came in the fulfilment of the promise of God to restore good relationships between God, his people and creation. Through the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ, people are saved from God's condemnation. They become part of God's new community and experience the peace and justice of his coming rule. God has a special concern for the poor and powerless. Because God's intention is reconciliation and community he has a special concern for those who are marginalised and excluded.

The peace and justice of God's kingdom are recognisable now through the power of the Holy Spirit, but will only be fully realised when Christ returns in glory. In the power of the Holy Spirit we are called to play our part in bringing reconciliation to our disordered world. Tearfund's focus is on the economically poor and powerless, but our concern is to see restored relationships in all their fullness, not just economic well-being.

Christian development is distinctive because of our commitment to reconciling people to God. However, in the Bible, reconciliation with God cannot be separated from reconciliation with others. Our responsibility to God is expressed through our response to others. This is the well-spring of Christian development.

There are two priorities in Christian development:

#### *The priority of relationships*

Reconciliation means that a desire for good relationships is woven into all our activities. We are not isolated individuals, but persons in relationships designed to live interdependently in communities and in the wider world. Therefore a constant question for us is, how does what we are doing affect relationships? One expression of this priority of relationships is our commitment to working in partnership and co-operation with others.

#### *The priority of the future*

In the future God will establish a new heaven and a new earth. We serve God now in the light of this hope. We want rich and poor to have the hope of a home in this new creation where there is no more death, mourning, crying or pain and where God is present with his people. Therefore reconciliation with God through submission to Jesus Christ is the greatest need of the poor, as with all people. We are therefore committed to the proclamation of the gospel. And we challenge people to prioritise the future through commitment in the present to the gospel and the poor, so that they invest in 'treasure in heaven' rather than 'treasure on earth'.

### **The characteristics of Christian development**

#### *Compassion*

Christian development must reflect the sacrificial love and compassion of Christ. Reconciliation is born out of love - love for God and compassion for those in need. We should always treat those with whom we work with love and respect without distinction as people made in God's image. Although we work through Christian partners, all our work is directed to those in need regardless of their religious beliefs.

#### *Justice*

Reconciliation requires social justice because poverty often arises from an unjust exercise of power. We are therefore committed to advocacy - speaking up on behalf of the powerless and enabling the poor to speak up for themselves. Advocacy and empowerment may lead to conflict. In these circumstances our ultimate aim remains restored relationships.

#### *Character*

We believe that the character and godliness of the person who undertakes Christian development is crucially important. Our desire is to be like Christ, 'God with us', reflecting his commitment to people, his inclusion of all and his willingness to proclaim the truth of God

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<sup>17</sup> The Bible's word for restored relationships with God, others in community and creation is 'shalom'. 'Shalom' is the goal of Christian development.

without compromise. We need to be ready to change through our interaction with the poor. We want to be poor in spirit, grieved by sin and its effects, and meek towards others. We want to commit ourselves to righteousness and justice, to show mercy, to be pure in heart and to be peacemakers.

#### *Cultural sensitivity*

Cultural diversity is an expression of God's goodness. The resources and knowledge of every community are to be valued. We recognise the danger of imposing our cultural values on others.

#### *Cultural transformation*

We also believe that no culture is without fault. The gospel challenges and transforms all cultures, including our own.

#### *Accountability*

Good relationships require mutual accountability, trust and transparency. Corruption and self-indulgence have no place in Christian development. There needs to be monitoring and evaluation for effective work and learning. We are accountable to God to steward the resources of creation for the good of all people.

#### *Leadership*

Good leadership and management are important for effective work. Our model is Christ who came not to be served, but to serve. Leaders need humility before God and a commitment to the needs of others above their own.

#### *Empowerment for service*

Empowerment enables people to make choices, to have a voice and become agents of change. The hopelessness and powerlessness of poverty demean the dignity which God has given people and denies them the opportunity to work and serve others. Because our goal is restored relationships, we believe empowerment must be driven by a commitment to serving others.

#### *Participation*

Participation involves people taking part in decisions and actions that affect their lives. It recognises people's dignity and is one of the key ways by which people become empowered. God's love extends to all people and Jesus offered friendship to the excluded. We want to include the marginalised and excluded such as women, children, older people and people with disabilities, valuing their contributions.

#### *Sustainability*

Sustainability is a continuing process of positive personal and community change, not simply financial independence or the endurance of the physical products of development. Reconciliation to God facilitates sustainable change, breaking the power of harmful traditions, setting us free for service and creating an openness<sup>1</sup> to further change. Sustainable Christian development requires sustainable Christian communities.

#### *Integration*

Christian development addresses the different needs of a community. This requires co-operation within the community and linkages with other groups, both those who are Christians and those who are not.

### **The context of Christian development**

#### *Prayer*

In all that we do we are totally dependent on God. There is a spiritual reality to development that a secular worldview often ignores. We are engaged in a spiritual conflict. Therefore prayer is essential for Christian development. The only way to keep going and see significant change is through the gracious power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

### *Church and partnership*

God has called the church to be a reconciled community. We define the church as communities of people who follow Jesus Christ linked together as part of the worldwide people of God. We do not equate the church with denominations, structures, institutions or hierarchies. Denominations and parachurch organisations have a role, but we believe they must serve local Christian communities where these exist or have a vision for indigenous local churches where they do not currently exist. The church is central to God's saving purpose. It is the community in which God lives by his Spirit.

We are, therefore, committed to working in partnership with evangelical churches, enabling them to fulfil their ministry to the poor - whether through financial giving or practical service. Partnership expresses the solidarity of Christians reconciled through Christ and builds up local churches. Partnership involves commitment, risk, mutual learning, openness and respect.

The New Testament gives little explicit teaching on either evangelistic or developmental methods. Instead it calls upon the church to be a caring, inclusive and distinctive community of reconciliation reaching out in love to the world. When we see the church in this way there is no opposition between evangelism and social action.